Equality of Opportunity and Freedom from Discrimination

MHR Connections

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Chairperson leaves the Manitoba Human Rights Commission

Jerry Woods with his wife Cathy at his farewell lunch on September 18, 2013.

After 6 years as Chairperson of the Manitoba Human Rights Board of Commissioners, Jerry Woods is stepping down. His passion, openness and honesty characterized a man respected throughout the country. Jerry was the first Aboriginal Chairperson of a provincial Human Rights Commission in Canada.

A farewell lunch was held for him last week. Among the many staff and commissioners who will miss Jerry is Vice-Chairperson Yvonne Peters, who said his wisdom, passion, common sense and respect for communities in Winnipeg and throughout Manitoba, will be greatly missed.

"On behalf of the Board of Commissioners and staff, I would like to thank you for your 13 years of hard work, especially as Vice-Chair and Chair, she said. "I would also like to thank you for your commitment to human rights, your leadership and your inspiration."

Jerry thanked both staff and Commissioners for their support and advice over the years. He confided to those at the lunch that the wisdom everyone talks about is really that of his wife, Cathy Woods.

Among the many special guests at the farewell lunch were: Attorney General and Minister of Justice, the Honourable Andrew Swan, the Honourable Gordon Macintosh Minister of Conservation and Water Stewardship, former Chairpersons Janet Baldwin and Ken Filkow, past Executive Director Dianna Scarth and Sherri Helgason, Director of the National Aboriginal Initiative with the Canadian Human Rights Commission.

Joining Jerry were members of his family; his wife Cathy, daughter Aimee and grandchildren Mason and Jocelyn.

The Honourable Andrew Swan thanked Jerry for his dedication and hard work. He then joked how difficult it was for him to call Jerry "the best chairperson" as two former chairs were in the room. "I will say Jerry was one of the best chairpersons of the Manitoba Human Rights Commission."

Jerry most admired the quiet heroes in the fight against discrimination. "I have been continually impressed with the

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The Rights Connection
by Joan Braun - Executive Director

Over the years the Manitoba Human Rights Commission and its valued partners the Canadian Human Rights Commission and the Manitoba Association for Rights and Liberties have been awarding the Human Rights Commitment Award and The Sybil Shack Human Rights Youth Award to Manitobans who have defended human rights, said "no" to discrimination and have contributed to the advancement human dignity.

Past Chairperson Jerry Woods refers the many past recipients as "unsung heroes" who quietly go about doing this silent work.

Now it's the time to acknowledge them and every year around December 10th, International Human Rights Day, we celebrate their achievements.

The problem is that we need your help telling us about these people. They may be colleagues, friends or family members.Teachers may know of students, or students may suggest a teacher. We are asking you to send us information about the person or group you think is deserving of one of these human rights awards.

All that is required is a contact/reference person (name, phone number, email address), the name of the potential recipient, and a brief reason why this group or individual should be considered for either the Commitment Award or the Youth award. You may also enclose any supporting articles, Facebook pages, websites, letters, etc. if you like.

The following is the criteria for both awards. We will be choosing three recipients for each one.

The Commitment Award of Manitoba honours Manitobans (individuals or groups) who courageously contribute to the advancement human dignity and the elimination of discrimination in the province.

The Sybil Shack Human Rights Youth Award recognizes exceptional young people (individuals or groups under 25 years of age) who work tirelessly towards the promotion and protection of human rights either within Manitoba or abroad.

An independent panel will review all the suggestions and you will be informed as to their final decisions. A reception will be held in December celebrating International Human Rights Day where the recipients will receive their award.

Please send this information to hrc@gov.mb.ca by November 15, 2013, or let us know if you have any questions.

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resilience, determination and grace of the people who fight discrimination," he said. "Most are unsung heroes and I thank you for your silent work defending human rights, and fighting against discrimination."

Jerry was appointed to the Commission as Vice-chairperson in 2001. In 2007 he became Chairperson. One of Jerry's greatest passions was creating human rights awareness in young people. He hosted the Commission's first youth conference in 2001 and continued to do so for the next 10 years.

Throughout his years on the Board, Jerry represented the Commission at countless conferences, meetings, ceremonies and media interviews. He spoke eloquently about his own experiences and those of the many people he spoke with. He was always proud to say that he was a member of the Bear Clan from the Couchiching First Nation and that his spirit name is Ish Ka Dae Mukwa, which is Fire Bear in Ojibway.

Jerry began the Racialized Communities and Police Services Project in 2005 when a neighbourhood safety committee approached him raising concerns about the lack of communication and a worsening relationship between racialized communities and the Winnipeg Police. Jerry met with three consecutive Chiefs of Police over seven years and held countless community meetings. The final project report was released last year. The consensus of many community leaders was that communication between the Winnipeg Police Service and community organizations had improved, especially over the last five years.

On behalf of the staff of Manitoba Human Rights Commission, Executive Director Joan Braun said, "With both fondness and a bit of admitted sadness, we wish Jerry the very best." A new Chairperson has not yet been appointed.

Other voices

How is it that a soft-spoken mild-mannered man can have such an impact? In a world where sometimes it seems as if glitz and loud debates have taken over, you meet someone like Jerry Woods. Susan Butterfield former Director of the New Brunswick Human Rights Commission.

Jerry has been an exceptional chair who demonstrated his commitment to human rights and social justice every day. His integrity, wisdom and leadership have had a huge impact on the Commission which will continue to be felt long after his term as chair has ended. Former Executive Director Dianna Scarth, MHRC.

Jerry Woods is inspiring. It has been an honour working with him. Patricia Knipe, Communications Director, MHRC.

Women's Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF)
Manitoba's 23rd annual Persons Day Breakfast
Friday, October 18, 2013 - 7:15 - 9:00 a.m.
Winnipeg Convention Centre
Topic: Judging Equality
Guest speaker: Madam Justice Sheilah Martin
Court of Queen's Bench, Calgary AB
Tickets: $25
Available at: McNally Robinson Booksellers
Manitoba Status of Women 204-945-6281
LEAF Manitoba 204-453-1379, leafmb@mymts.net
Proceeds support the advancement of all women's equality.

Funding for Deaf children announced following human rights settlement agreement

Two Winnipeg families of Deaf children are happy to learn that the Manitoba Government's Sport Secretariat through its agency, Sport Manitoba, will provide additional funding for American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation services for young athletes participating in organized amateur sport activities. This has resolved a human rights complaint alleging systemic discrimination against Deaf children who wanted more participation in sports. The parties voluntarily entered into the mediation process before an investigation took place so no determination of discrimination had been found.

Kyra Zimmer, one of the parents who filed the complaint said, "Interpretation services will now be provided to Deaf children at every step of amateur sports activities from try-outs to competitions."

Both complainants, Ms Zimmer and Mr. Brian Boszeit, who are Deaf and are the parents of Deaf children, filed a human rights complaint on behalf of their children and all other Deaf children in Manitoba. According to these parents, there were barriers due to insufficient funding for ASL interpretation services. This made it more difficult for some Deaf children to participate fully in sports and develop leadership skills, avoid negative lifestyle choices and enjoy the benefits that other children have by participating in a wide range of amateur sport activities.

The parties involved in the complaint met and, through a Manitoba Human Rights Commission mediation process, agreed that a funding level up to a maximum of $40,000 per year for all Deaf children participating in sport would address the problem. This funding will be designated for interpretation services and help athletes communicate more clearly with their coaches and game officials.

"The province is committed to the full inclusion of Manitobans where they live, learn, work and play; ASL interpretation for Deaf children participating in amateur sport is an important step in meeting this goal," stated Family Services and Labour Minister Jennifer Howard, Minister responsible for Persons with Disabilities. Manitoba plans to enact accessibility legislation to remove barriers by working with the public and private sectors to make proactive, long-range plans that enhance accessibility for everyone.

Generally speaking, systemic discrimination affects a group (or groups) of people. In 1987 the Supreme Court of Canada defined systemic discrimination as practices or attitudes that have, whether by design or impact, the effect of limiting an individual or group's right to opportunities.

Joan Braun, the Executive Director of the Manitoba Human Rights Commission, says the Commission is very pleased with the results of this mediation. "It is a great example of a settlement, which was made voluntarily and in good faith by everyone involved with a view to provide access to sport for all Manitoba children," she said.